

WIZARDS IN FIGURES.

Some Wonderful Feats of Boys
Who Became Famous.

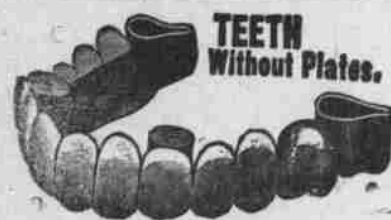
GAUSS WAS A RARE GENIUS.

He Was Not Only One of the Greatest
Mental Calculators on Record, but
He Was a Gifted Mathematician.
Dase's Marvelous Mental Work.

When scarcely three years old Gauss, according to an anecdote told by himself, followed mentally a calculation of his father's relative in regard to the wages of some workmen who were to be paid for overtime in proportion to their regular wages, and, detecting a mistake in the account, he called out, "Father, the reckoning is wrong; it makes so much," naming the exact amount. The calculations were repeated, and it turned out that the child was correct, while all who witnessed the performance were greatly surprised. He retained an extraordinary ability for mental calculations throughout life and remembered the first few decimals of the logarithms of all numbers, so that he was able to use the data of a logarithmic table in his mental calculations, and hence he possessed a mental slide rule—a unique possession.

Gauss was not only one of the greatest mental calculators on record, but he excelled equally in all branches of pure and applied mathematics. At the age of twenty he discovered the first rigorous proof of the fundamental theorem of algebra, which affirms that every algebraic equation has as many roots as its degree, and at the age of twenty-four he published his great work on the theory of numbers under the title "Disquisitiones Arithmeticae." Later in life he turned his attention principally to applied mathematics, especially to astronomy and geodesy, and he is generally regarded as the last of the great mathematicians who were pre-eminent in nearly all branches of mathematical knowledge of his day.

While Gauss was both a great mental calculator and a great mathematician and was a real mathematical prodigy, we proceed to consider several who were merely arithmetical prodigies and seemed to have very little general mathematical ability. The greatest of these is Dase, who was born at Hamburg in 1824 and "seems to have been little more than a human calculating machine, able to carry on enormous calculations in his head, but nearly incapable of understanding the principles of mathematics and of very limited ability outside his chosen field." His extraordinary ability in mental calculation is evidenced by the fact that he was able to multiply mentally two numbers, each of which contained 100 figures. It took him eight and three-quarters hours to perform this feat, which stands in a class by itself, as no other arithmetical prodigy is known to have been able to multiply mentally two numbers each consisting of more than thirty-nine figures. Two forty-figure numbers Dase was able to multiply in forty minutes, while he would multiply two eight-figure numbers in less than one minute.



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What is most surprising about this greatest calculator on record is that he was stupid in mathematics. Petersen is said to have tried in vain for six weeks to get the first elements of mathematics into his head, and other eminent mathematicians found that he had very little mathematical ability. Fortunately he was advised by some of the leading mathematicians of his day to turn his extraordinary ability to scientific uses instead of going around the country giving public exhibitions, a career upon which he had entered at the age of fifteen. He calculated many useful tables and was engaged on an extensive factor table at the time of his death. The ease and speed with which he could count the numbers of books in a case, the number of sheep in a herd, etc., were almost more surprising than his extraordinary ability as a mental calculator.

Another well known mental calculator, having even less mathematical ability than Dase, is Buxton, who remained illiterate through life, although his father had some education. He had a wonderful memory for numbers and could call off long numbers from right to left or from left to right with equal facility. On one occasion he squared mentally a thirty-nine figure number in two and a half months. He was extremely slow and in this respect resembled a negro of the name of Tom Fuller, who is known as the Virginia calculator. Although entirely illiterate, he was able to reduce mentally years and months to seconds and could multiply two nine-figure numbers.

Darbois has called attention to an infant prodigy, Joseph Bertrand was born in Paris in 1822 and was such a delicate child that his parents did not expect him to arrive at manhood, and hence his early education was partly neglected. At the age of four he was sick for a long time and overheard the lessons which were given his brother in the same room. He knew the letters of the alphabet, but nothing more. When he was convalescent his parents brought him a book to look at the pictures, and he relates in his account of his childhood that he remembers distinctly how he shocked his parents by reading the text fluently. His frightened father snatched the book from him and commanded that under no pretext should he be allowed to do any work.

The manner in which he learned elementary algebra and elementary geometry is still more extraordinary. We reproduce his own account:

"At the age of nine I had the great

misfortune to lose my father, who during the last year of his life resided with my uncle, who directed then a school preparing for L'Ecole Polytechnique. The students, the youngest of whom was twice my age, loved me very much, and I was happy in their midst. I was assiduous at their recitations and often followed them to their classes. The teachers regarded me with astonishment, but paid little attention to me. The students observed that I understood the work, and when a demonstration appeared difficult the first one who noticed me would run after me, take me up in his arms and placing me on a chair so that I could reach the blackboard, make me repeat

the demonstration." At the age of sixteen he entered L'Ecole Polytechnique, and as the examiner knew that he had already passed the examination for the doctor's degree in science he gave him some very difficult questions. From one of the answers it appeared that Bertrand had never opened a table of logarithms. The examiner considered this answer an impertinence, but gave him the highest grade. At L'Ecole Polytechnique Bertrand says that he was a problem for his companions. He always received the highest grades, but he was ignorant of some of the simplest things. For instance, he did not know what words were called adverbs, as he had never prepared a lesson in literature or in science.

Bertrand's extraordinary youth gave rise to many marvelous stories. Fortunately he wrote a brief account of his early life when he was elected in 1884 to the French academy; hence we have a more reliable sketch of this infant prodigy than is possible to obtain in most other cases—for instance, in the case of his countryman, Pascal. The facts that Bertrand was permanent secretary of the Academy of Sciences for more than a quarter of a century, that he is the author of many theorems relating to modern mathematical subjects and that he lived so recently add interest to the account of his marvelous early education.—Scientific American.

Relativity of Knowledge. The "relativity of knowledge" means that you can know things only as they are related to your faculties. The thing in itself and apart from the way it appears to us is unknown and unknowable. Absolute knowledge is out of the question. In a word, we know appearances, but never the reality behind the appearances; the shadows, but never the substance itself. In fine, the gist of the doctrine of the "relativity of knowledge" is that our so called knowledge is only phantasmagoria. We know the appearance, but we have no means of deciding whether the appearance is true or false.—New York American.

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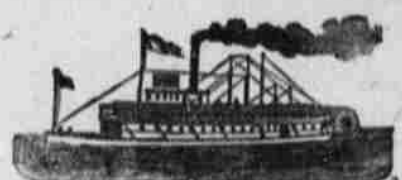


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